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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 001292

SIPDIS

STATE FOR R, ECA, IIP, NEA, NEA/ARPI, NEA/PI, NEA/PPD

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [KPAO](#) [OEXC](#) [SCUL](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: ISLAMIC AFFAIRS OFFICIAL PROMOTES MODERATION,
REQUESTS EXPANDED EXCHANGE PROGRAMS WITH U.S.

REF: MANAMA 468

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) Ministry of Islamic Affairs Under Secretary Dr. Fareed Al Muftah told the Ambassador September 4 that he welcomed USG support for exchange programs to promote the concepts of tolerance and moderation in Islam. The Ministry would assist in programming American speakers on Islam in the United States and requested the establishment of programs to send groups of Bahraini clerics to the U.S. to exchange ideas with Americans on the role of religion in the modern world. Al Muftah has launched initiatives to provide standard language to imams for their Friday sermons with themes of tolerance and coexistence, and a council to provide mainstream guidance on Islamic principles to combat extremist trends. End Summary.

Programming on Islam in the Modern World

2. (C) Ministry of Islamic Affairs Under Secretary Dr. Fareed Al Muftah opened the September 4 with the Ambassador by expressing his condolences for the losses caused by hurricane Katrina. He said he talked about this tragedy during his Friday sermon on September 2. The Ambassador expressed his gratitude for Bahrain's generosity in donating \$5 million for the relief effort. The Ambassador stated that a key aim of the United States was to promote the common values of moderation and tolerance through outreach efforts. He cited as an example that Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Hughes had met recently with American Muslim leader to enhance relations and understanding. Recalling previous comments by Al Muftah, the Ambassador said the United States would like to support his efforts to spread awareness of Islam as a tolerant and moderate religion, and passed him information on possible American Muslim speakers. (Note: Post is planning to program a speaker on this subject early in FY-2006, to be requested septel.)

3. (C) Al Muftah welcomed the United States' interest in supporting his campaign and said he would like to program any speakers the U.S. sends to discuss Islam. He said they could provide needed perspective to Bahrainis about living side-by-side with people of other religions and explain the way they practice Islam in the U.S. He is organizing a conference in December to bring together Bahraini imams, both Sunni and Shia, to discuss Islam and the modern world. Those who don't understand the Koran, Al Muftah said, think it tells them to carry out jihad against those of different faiths. This is wrong, and the conference will deal with these types of questions and provide accurate guidance and interpretations. The intended result is that Friday sermons contain clearer ideas and a more modern interpretation of the religion. In response to the Ambassador's suggestion, Al Muftah welcomed the concept of American speakers participating in the conference.

Expanding Cultural Exchanges

4. (C) Al Muftah asked about the possibility of Bahrain and the United States signing a bilateral protocol to promote cooperation in the field of religion. His idea is to use an agreement to systematize programs on religious/cultural understanding via lectures, speeches, conferences, exhibition and workshops. He also suggested sending groups of Bahraini Sunni and Shia clerics to the United States to exchange ideas with Americans on the role of religion in the modern world. (Note: Post will consult with ECA to determine if funding is available beyond that already allocated for the FY-2006 IV candidate slate. A proposal for a special single country IV program will come septel.)

5. (C) Al Muftah said that he was working on the formation

of a council at the Ministry to educate religious scholars on tolerance and moderation. The idea comes as a result of an exercise over the summer when the Ministry gave imams standard language for use in their sermons that combat the incorrect concept that non-Muslims are infidels. The Ministry is preparing a second set of points on the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims and the treatment of non-Muslims in Islamic countries. Al Muftah said that most imams welcomed these ideas; those who did not agree chose not to use the language rather than criticize it.

Islamic Guidance and Personal Freedoms

16. (C) The proposed council would coordinate the efforts of highly educated clerics to talk with citizens in a setting other than Friday prayers about moderation and tolerance. The Ministry has forwarded its proposal to the Cabinet which, upon approval, will send it to parliament for funding. The Ministry intends to send a delegation to parliament to lobby for the appropriation.

17. (C) Al Muftah said that some conservative Sunnis in parliament, led by independent Salafi MP Jassim Al Saeedi, have advocated the formation of a security organization with powers to enforce Islamic law, a "virtue and vice" group, as exists in Saudi Arabia. Al Muftah deeply opposes this and, as an alternative, has proposed that the Ministry council provide guidance "in a modern way" that does not conflict with personal freedoms. He warned that an extremist trend exists in Bahrain and he and his Ministry are dealing with it in a serious way.

18. (C) As an example, Al Muftah told the Ambassador that the Ministry had suspended a Sunni preacher in early August who had made outrageous accusations against the United States, Iran, and Bahraini Shia during a sermon. Al Muftah called in the cleric and warned him about making accusatory generalizations about anyone or anything. The preacher agreed to strive to do better and, since he returned to his mosque, his sermons have improved a bit, Al Muftah said.

MONROE